

New Visitor Center to Display Model of LG Warship

By Mirror Staff

The first exhibit for the new Fort George - Battlefield Park Visitor Center, which will be part of the Lake George Park Commission's new office building in the state-owned park, has been completed.

It's a model of the Land Tortoise, a military vessel constructed at Lake George in 1758. The 52-foot-long radeau was deliberately scuttled by the British that winter, to be retrieved the following year. Instead it remained at the bottom of the lake, where it was discovered by a team of divers, historians and underwater archaeologists in 1990.

In 1998, the group successfully persuaded the US government to recognize the shipwreck as a national historic landmark. It's one of only six shipwrecks in American waters to have earned that designation.

The model was built by Lake George native Dale Henry, currently a boatwright at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum in Vergennes, Vermont.

"It is a superbly authentic model of the actual vessel," said historian Russell Bellico, who photographed the original in 107 feet of water.

According to the Fort George Alliance, which will operate the Visitors Center, Henry built



his model with native woods to duplicate the original materials of the vessel: oak for the hull and pine for the upper bulwarks (sides). The interior frames (ribs) were made to replicate the rough oak frames of the original vessel.

The model is 26 1/2" long, 9 5/8" wide and 4 5/8" high and includes a set of oars. The mahogany case

was made by a craftsman who also makes display cases for Mystic Seaport, the New York Yacht Club, and other maritime institutions.

According to the Alliance, the authenticity of the Land Tortoise model was made possible by 28 pages of survey material provided by Joseph W. Zarzynski, executive director of Bateaux Below, who

was the project director of the 1990-1992 archaeological survey of the vessel. Henry also relied on Bellico's photographs.

Bellico said the model will become part of a larger exhibit, telling the story of Lake George's maritime history.

"The maritime exhibit will also include the actual gunport lids from the Land Tortoise," said Bellico.

According to Bellico, "The Land Tortoise is the only intact vessel from the French and Indian War and the oldest intact shipwreck in North America," said Bellico.

While it still lies at the bottom of the lake, it is part of a Submerged Heritage Preserve consisting of several shipwrecks, including other British warships scuttled in Lake George's south basin in 1758 as a defense against French raiders.

"While this is the first exhibit, others are in the planning and development stage including an exhibit related to the recent discovery of the Revolutionary War cemetery believed to be associated with the 1776 military hospital for the Patriots in what is now the Park," said Lyn Hohmann, the president of the Fort George Alliance.